

February 26, 2019

Joint Committee on Ways & Means
Subcommittee on Natural Resources
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301



RE: HB 5019

Dear Co-Chair Taylor, Co-Chair Reardon and members of the subcommittee,

My name is Bob Skinner, past President of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and current President of the National Public Lands Council. I currently live in Jordan Valley, Malheur County with my wife, raising cattle with our family, who represent the seventh generation on our ranch. (Jordan Valley is as far from Salem as you can be and still be in Oregon) I have been passionately involved with county advisory committees, the local ambulance board and the local Rangeland Fire Protection Associations.

I am here today to voice my support for additional General Funding in the amount of \$450,000 for the Department of Forestry's Rangeland Fire Protection Associations. This additional funding for RFPAs would go towards firefighter training and equipment, such as personal protection equipment and radios. Volunteers, like myself, organized by local RFPAs, provide the first line of defense against wildfires in many areas. Fires and the weeds that invade rangelands after a fire, are the two biggest threats to sage grouse and our rangeland health. Improved equipment, training and coordination with BLM have dramatically improved initial responses to fires in recent years.

Eastern Oregon ranchers and local Rangeland Fire Protection Associations are committed to protecting our rangeland resources, certainly sage grouse conservation is a huge benefactor of this effort. Over the years, the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and the Public Lands Council have been involved in the Oregon Sage Grouse Plan and as a result. Working with U.S. Fish and Wildlife and ODFW of to conserve sage grouse we maintain an active involvement with Range Scientists such as Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center in Burns, Oregon.

We cannot measure what does not happen, and we may never know the true savings from the RFPA's efforts, but it is huge. RFPA's contribution to conserving the sage grouse habitat in Eastern Oregon may well be the biggest "game changer" in the sage grouse equation.

It has recently been mentioned, Oregon's RFPA program has been successful in the conservation of sage grouse to the point that Oregon shows the least decline in population compared to many other states. Other states are looking at Oregon's RFPA sage grouse conservation efforts and learning how they can utilize the program in their own state.

Recent data from ODF, dated October 23, 2018, shows that in 2016 there were 111,760 acres of Greater Sage Grouse habitat burned by fires, whereas in 2018, the habitat burned by fires decreased to 22, 370 acres. That is a very significant decrease. In fact, Oregon was the only state out of California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming to show a decrease in burned acres of sage grouse habitat. That means we are doing something right here in Oregon. The Vale District BLM reported just as many fires in 2018 as they had in most previous years – none made the news. THIS is huge news

RFPAs organize and authorize rancher participation in fire suppression, alongside federal agency firefighters . These all-volunteer crews of ranchers have the required training and legal authority to respond to fires on BLM, State (DSL), as well as private lands.

In Salem, you often hear ranchers vocalizing opposition to government programs or regulations, but I can attest to the fact that our working relationship with government firefighters has evolved into a very impressive outcome.

ODF reported 1,114 total fires in Oregon in 2018 and 76,743 was the number of total acres burned, I remind you that a big part of that acreage was on "unprotected lands", they now realize the advantage of having RFPAs and it is my understanding they are forming one next year. Think

how many acres would have been burned without Oregon's established 28 Rangeland Protection Associations on the Eastern side of the state. When lightning storms roll over the landscape they usually produce multiple ignitions. RFPA firefighters are very geographically dispersed, our communication system is second to none in the JVRFPAs, with access to 5 different repeaters that are all privately owned and maintained – it is really hard to hide from a repeater in our jurisdiction. Everyone goes on high alert and the radios “light up” with reports and coordination orders. **Our initial attack** response is second to none. We alert BLM dispatch as soon as we confirm ignition – this is huge in that aerial attack is responding hours earlier than before, and we have local people who are intimately knowledgeable about the terrain and the roads for access.

RFPAs encourage working land communities to increase participation in fire preparation and response. Sometimes these communities have to work with regulations from state and federal firefighting institutions and the RFPAs help build a relationship between community and agency, where there has historically been tension (**I can't stress enough the value of what I've just said**).

As an experienced volunteer with the ODF's Rangeland Fire Protection Association and on behalf of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, who represents nearly 2000 ranchers in Oregon, I ask you to support additional funding of \$450,000 for the Oregon Department of Forestry budget for training and equipment. Oregon must support our great volunteers and the services they perform, such as: resource protection, conservation of sage grouse habitat, stopping economic loss to ranching families and rural communities, preventing wildlife loss (death), and one we have ignored for many years – and certainly one that our urban cousins complain about every year – that is the huge amount of smoke (2018) that these wildfires emit into the atmosphere (carbon).

Thanks you – would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

Bob Skinner

Oregon Cattlemen's Association

